REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Honoring the Past — Serving the Future

The retirement of the Registered Massage Therapist Program in April, 1991, has generated many feelings and thoughts about tradition, change and progress within AMTA. Some were unhappy with the decision to discontinue the program, others thought it was about time, and most members took it in stride—another change among so many these days. Events like this can give pause for reflection.

During its 37-year existence, the RMT had become an honored tradition within AMTA, especially among its longtime members. Tradition has its value. It is something familiar. It provides a sense of stability in a world of future shock. It is a direct link to the past that helps give meaning to the present.

Just as surely as tradition is comforting, change is both disturbing and inevitable. It is challenging to balance the two so that people today are well served. You can get stuck in the past by hanging on to what came before for its own sake. But changing too fast leads to confusion and loss of identity. Either can breed a sense of meaninglessness—meaningless tradition in one case and lack of roots in the other.

I believe that progress is achieved most successfully when tradition is honored while adaptations to the changing world are carefully forged. Traditions whose usefulness is dwindling are still valuable as roots, and are best honored in remembrance and celebration.

It was in this spirit that a luncheon was held for Registered Massage Therapists attending the National Convention in Palm Springs last November. At that time, much interest was expressed in the history of the RMT program. And so, for the record—and in the interest of honoring our AMTA traditions—here is a short history of the Registered Massage Therapist program, followed by a commentary on what may evolve from it, the Swedish Massage Program.

Honoring the Past

In 1954, eleven years after the founding of the American Association of Masseurs and Masseuses (AAMM), the Registered Masseur/Masseuse Program began. Article 6 of the AAMM Bylaws on membership was amended in 1954 to insert the following provision:

> *After having been a member for three years, and having shown good faith, paid dues regularly and complied with all provisions in the Constitution and Bylaws, [active members] shall receive... a Certificate of Registration signed by the Board of Registry which shall entitle the member to use the letters R.M. (Registered Masseur or Masseuse) after their name, and shall be recognized as a Registered Masseur or Masseuse as defined by the American Registry of Masseurs and Masseuses.*

In the beginning, the Registered Masseur and the Registered Masseuse certificates were valid for only one year and had to be renewed each year. No examination was given and there was no mention of advanced knowledge and skills. It seems to have been an "in house" title to give recognition to loyal association members.

In 1959, when the association changed its name to the American Massage & Therapy Association, the designation R.M. was changed to R.M.T. to indicate Registered Massage Therapist. The program otherwise stayed the same.

The RMT program was revised in 1964 after ten years of operation and a written examination was added. James Bowling, former AMTA National Board member and Secretary-Treasurer, and first elected National Director of Education (1968), recalled that he had promoted the idea of adding an examination as a condition of RMT designation. As is the case today, many AMTA members in the 1960s had not graduated from school programs. The examination would insure that all who received the RMT designation, after three years of active AMTA membership, had a common body of knowledge in massage therapy.

The first examination contained what was thought to be the knowledge and skills gained in the basic massage therapy programs of that time. The oral exam was on contraindications and massage therapy theory; the written on anatomy, physiology, and hydrotherapy; and the practical was a Swedish massage on half the body, i.e., one leg, one arm, one side of torso, and so on.

For those first examinations, a *Massage Therapy Review* book was available, in conjunction with a two-day preparatory workshop to ensure equal access to the same standardized information and to encourage a high success rate. Fifty people took the RMT examination in the first year it was given, i.e., 1968-69. It was given at three regional conferences to pilot the exam (Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Abindgdon, Virginia; and Sacramento, California), and at the National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida in August 1969. As National Director of Education, James Bowling was the chief examiner in Miami Beach.

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Those who passed the exam were "issued a certificate of registration, and shall hereafter, and as long as they continue to be members in good standing, be entitled to use the letters R.M.T. as defined by the Registry Board." (*Massage Journal*, September 1968).

The RMT designation was required for those wishing to run for AMTA offices from the late 1970s until January 1990. At that time, the National Board voted to drop the RMT requirement for holding office.

In the 1980s, the AMTA began to officially discourage the use of the initials "RMT", along with other initials (e.g., MsT). Members were asked to spell out the designation "Registered Massage Therapist" to avoid the appearance of holding a college degree or government licensing title. Current AMTA Bylaws prohibit use of such titles (Article V, section 1.B.)

Over the years, the RMT designation was valued and sought by members for various reasons. For some it was a gateway to holding office in the Association. To others, especially those who did not receive formal training it was evidence of their competency in massage therapy.

In later years, the examination was made more difficult to reflect advanced training. The content of the RMT examination retired in 1991 was primarily remedial Swedish massage. There were practical and case study portions of the exam which focused on developing and implementing a treatment plan for a specific pathological condition using primarily a Swedish massage approach. The written exam included questions on anatomy and physiology, pathology, contraindications, hydrotherapy and Swedish massage technique.

In the 1989 Guidelines to the Bylaws, the Registered Massage Therapist test is listed as an "advanced certification exam." The only prerequisite for taking the exam was AMTA membership for at least three consecutive years.

There were several reasons for the decision to retire the RMT Program. Its original intent, to standardize basic knowledge and skills of AMTA members, had been accomplished by the development of the Membership Entrance Examination (MEE) in the 1970s. The MEE did not exist at the time the RMT Examination was created. In most recent developments, the National Certification Program is designed to reflect entry level knowledge and skills for the profession, thus possibly making the MEE unnecessary.

Another reason was that the content of the examination no longer reflected the intent of later years, i.e., "advanced" massage therapy. It is no longer clear just what "advanced" means. Advanced work today could take a variety of forms; for example, further study in oriental bodywork, or various forms of deep tissue work, or specializing in a particular client population such as athletes.

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It is much easier to define advanced Swedish massage, than to describe advanced massage therapy. In the past, "massage therapy" was synonymous with "Swedish massage" within AMTA, but by the 1990s this equation had collapsed. Where we were once more homogeneous (i.e. Swedish massage practitioners), we are now very heterogeneous with more eclectic practices.

To have a valid certification for advanced massage therapy, it would be necessary to go through the same steps that we have gone through for the entry level National Certification Program. This would include a survey to find agreement among massage therapists on a common core of advanced knowledge. In this period of transition in the field, it is doubtful if a common core could be found—and a great deal of expense and effort would have to be spent to find out. A better strategy would be to wait for the entry level National Certification to gel, observe further changes in the field for a few years, and then make a decision about an advanced certification.

The last RMT examination was given at the 1990 National Conference in Boulder, Colorado under the supervision of Jeanne Aland of Georgia, who had served as the Chief Examiner for several years. The Registered Massage Therapist Program was officially retired by a vote of the National Board a year later at the 1991 National Conference in Minneapolis.

Serving the Future

To adapt to recent changes in the field, it is necessary to redefine what we are all about. The National Board is reviewing a much broader definition of massage therapy which will include the many "hands on" approaches being taught today.

During the deliberations about the RMT Program and development of the National Certification Program, it became clear that Swedish Massage, as a distinct discipline, was being lost. Swedish massage is now viewed, not as the only or most basic approach, but as a unique specialization alongside other specializations within the larger field.

The Swedish Massage Program being proposed for AMTA members would serve the future of the AMTA and of the field as a whole by clearly defining the essence of classical Swedish massage. It is expected to have two levels, i.e., a health and wellness level, and a remedial or rehabilitative level. The content will be exclusively Swedish massage — essentially the content of the retired Registered Massage Therapist examination. It could be thought of as an updated and improved RMT program with a new name to reflect its special place in massage therapy today.

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